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ABSTRACT

In Georgia, professional textbook selection for the public schools has been undermined by a small interest group influencing the State Board of Education. Normally textbooks are selected by a professional committee whose recommendations are adopted by the Board. In 1971 "The Americans," edited by Edwin Fenton and recommended by the selection committee, was attacked and all of Fenton's works excluded from the list. In subsequent meetings of the Board of books were reinstated, then finally excluded from the list. At the same time the Board specified four books out of the 39 listed as appropriate for history and government at the 11th and 12th grade level. A protest, based on economic considerations and mounted by school superintendents, postponed implementation of the latter restriction. Action brought by the social studies educators resulted in legislation removing the power of the State Board to approve specific texts. Further interpretation of the law, however, confirmed the Board's general approval powers. The South's fear of subversion is not unique but should be overridden by recognition of the difference between informed evaluation by professionals and personal bias. (JH)

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The Georgia Situation: Walking The Thin Line Between Professional Determination and Censorship

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In Georgia the pressures on educational decision-making by a small faction of apparent right wing activists has taken the form of interference with the process of professional textbook selection. In the past two years the standard procedure for reviewing and recommending social studies textbooks has been undermined by a vociferous and persistent minority who have been able to impose their views on one of the highest echelons of decision-making in Georgia education, and therefore, on schools throughout the state. This interference and the resulting changes have received amazingly little publicity. Many educators and parents are unaware of just what is happening. Meanwhile a small right wing, well-organized pressure group, with a very official sounding name, exerts its influence on the inside fringe of the decision-making process.

A description of the structure within which the textbook selections are made is necessary to understanding the sequence of events in the past two years.

The Structure for Decision-Making

The established method of textbook review and adoption in Georgia is for the ten-member State Board of Education to appoint a Professional Textbook Committee to carefully review, compare, rate and recommend textbooks in social studies and other subject areas. The twelve members

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of the Professional Textbook Committee are appointed annually--one from each Congressional district and two from the state at large. Books are reviewed and rated on a 1,000 point scale by the Committee. To be recommended a book must receive 750 points.

The recommendations of the Committee are forwarded to the State Board of Education for final approval and then published in an official volume which is sent out to school districts throughout the state. The State Board normally accepts the recommendations of the professional committee.

Books on this list are the only ones which can be purchased with the state funds allocated to the school districts. Books not on the list must be purchased from additional funds raised within the school district. About 80% of the total current textbook expenditures in the state come from state funds. Manny county school districts do not have any other funds for textbook purchase. This list by what it includes or excludes has far reaching influence over curriculum and instruction in social studies throughout the state.

The Sequence of Events

The list of social studies textbooks for 1972-73 which was recommended by the Professional Textbook Committee came before the State Board of Eudcation on December 16, 1971. One Board member attacked a single book on the list, The Americans, an eighth grade history book for slow learners edited by Edwin Fenton. The board member, Kenneth Kilpatrick, claimed that the book "injects some things that I don't think have anything to do with the subject of history." It was his contention that the book would create "disruption and dissension in our society."[1] Kilpatrick moved that

the recommended list be approved with the exception of all books authored by, edited by or containing information by Edwin Fenton. The attack on Fenton evidently was based on personal review of only one of the ten different textbooks on the list which had been edited by Edwin Fenton. Board members normally do not conduct their own investigation of books already reviewed by the Professional Committee, and the other Board members at the meeting apparently accepted one man's opinion of the book and its editor when they voted unanimously in favor of the motion. The books were then referred back to the Professional Textbook Committee for further study.

When news of this action was read in the press some educators wondered what might have motivated Kilpatrick to select The Americans to read over and criticize from a long list of recommended social studies books. Even more puzzling was the wholesale attack on anything written or edited by Fenton. There is evidence that a small well-organized group which calls itself the Georgia Basic Education Council is likely to have aroused the opposition to the Fenton books by Kilpatrick, and eventually some other Board members. A copy of a polemic by the Chairman of the Georgia Basic Education Council, Al Leake, against "all books authored or edited by Ed Fenton" was addressed to "Members of the State Board of Education" and distributed before the December meeting.[2] Also in a letter to Edwin Fenton in January, Leake claimed "it was my objections that caused the State Board members to make their own independent study that precipitated their rejection of your textbooks ..."[3]

In early January the Professional Textbook Committee met and reaffirmed the recommendation of all ten of the textbooks. The books had been rated 900 on the 1,000 point scale, and members of the Textbook Committee

planned to defend their recommendations at the State Board meeting later that month.

At the meeting of the State Board of Education on January 20 after some heated discussion of the American history content of the books, members voted 5 to 4 to uphold the recommendation of the Textbook Committee. The ten books were returned to the state adoption list, and they appeared on the official Georgia Textbook List which was published and distributed within the next few months.

However the issue was not settled. The agitation against the Fenton books apparently continued within the Board. At the May meeting which the Atlanta Journal described as a "stormy session,"[4] a board member who had been hospitalized at the time of the January meeting joined with the four opponents of the Fenton instructional books to vote 5 to 4 to reverse the January decision. This time the chairman of the State Board did not vote. The ten books were thus officially removed from the already published and distributed state approved list.

During the June meeting of the State Board, at the recommendation of an ad hoc committee composed of three members who had opposed the Fenton inquiry books, the State Board mandated a prescribed course of study for a year of 11th-12th grade history and government. In addition, they restricted the use of state funds for textbooks for that course to four history books. These four history books were selected from 39 history and government books on the state adopted list. Many highly-rated textbooks were eliminated. Not one American government textbook

was included. All four of the accepted textbooks were chronological histories with stated patriotic committments.

Perhaps the most effective publicized protest against the Board's tampering with the list of state adopted textbooks occurred in July at the annual conference of the Georgia Association of School Superintendents with the state associations of elementary and secondary school principals. Objecting on economic grounds rather than on grounds of unwarranted censorship, the superintendents complained that implementation of the June ruling of the State Board would cost "hundreds of thousands of dollars in needless expense" to replace books already selected and ordered from the earlier approved list.[5]

The State Board of Education held its July meeting just a few days after the superintendents' conference. The Board voted to postpone until 1973-74 implementation of the rule of restriction to one of four textbooks for teaching the prescribed American history and government course.

Meanwhile social studies educators in schools and colleges had been expressing their concern to each other, to members of the State Board of Education and to their legislators. The Georgia Council for the Social Sciences in the fall of 1972 communicated the details to its membership. A resolution adopted by the GCSS urged removal of all laws which restrict the diversity of instructional materials or their professional selection, arguing that "teachers must select instructional material without censorship."[6]

Legislative action was realized. A bill which passed the Georgia General Assembly in the early part of 1973 removed the power of approval by the State Board of specific textbooks for the required American history and government course. It appeared that some progress had been

made. However, the wording of the act raised some question among State Board members as to whether the law had totally removed the Board's authority to approve textbooks in the broad subject areas. Therefore, in April, 1973, the Georgia Attorney General was asked for a clarification of the law.

This fall the Attorney General ruled that the State Board of Education has retained the power to approve recommendations of the professional committee which evaluates instructional materials. As it stands now, the various social studies books edited by Edwin Fenton are still excluded from purchase with state funds, and the State Board of Education retains undiminished power to override professional evaluations by majority vote and, in effect, censor selected volumes.

Analysis

Neither Georgia nor the southern region is unique in its periodic reactions to fears of subversion in the public schools. Banned textbooks, loyalty oaths and mandated curricula are state-level actions which have not been confined to the South.

The South may be unique, however, in its xenophobic brand of provincialism which has made it particularly vulnerable to arguments that orthodox beliefs are being undermined in the schools. Southern attitudes toward education and toward social studies in particular have been notably receptive to reactionary arguments that subversive and alien philosiphies such as communism, socialism, welfare statism, internationalism, progressivism, "race-mixing," atheism and, perhaps now, inquiry-open-mindedness are being forced on their children in school.

In 1951 a single member of the Georgia State School Board (who was also an active member of the D.A.R.) launched an attack on Frank A. Magruder's widely accepted textbook, American Government because the book "played up world government and played down the American form of Government."[7] She succeeded in convincing her colleagues on the Board to suspend the book from the state adopted list. The suspension lasted only five months, but nevertheless Board members had acted hastily and on heresay.

In the 1951 case, and again in the recent banning of the Fenton books, a majority of the State Board was willing to reject the recommendations of professionals who evaluate books by a set of stated standards, and listen instead to a self-appointed committee of one or a few.

In the 1951 case of book banning, there was clear evidence of pressures exerted by a few, well-organized, persistent far right groups who want their own viewpoints taught as the truth. Currently, at least one such group is dogging both the State Board and certain state legislators. An examination of the Citizens Education Review, a publication of the Georgia Basic Education Council, indicates that this group was attacking the inquiry approach, especially as used in the Fenton books, as far back as 1969.[8] The subjects of biology and anthropology containing scientific theories of adaptation and evolution have also been attacked by this group throughout the past few years.

In the early fifties it was organized teachers who resisted and put down special interest interference with the textbook selection process. Today it is also organized social studies teachers who are standing up in defense of professional textbook evaluation. Thus far they have not been as successful. Eighteen months later the highly rated Fenton series is still excluded from the state texbook list.

Whether educators in the state of Georgia can beat back these attempts to reduce academic freedom and subvert the process of professional textbook selection remains to be seen. Surely, these are times when the efforts of educators should be dedicated to moving forward to improve curriculum and instruction, but in Georgia educators must first stand up in defense of procedures once established. For the difference between decisions based on informed evaluations by professionals and decisions based on personal biases and beliefs is extremely important. It is the difference between professional determination and censorship, and once again Georgians are confronted with a choice between them.

Footnotes

[1]Reported in the Atlanta Constitution, December 17, 1971.

[2]The letter to members of the State Board of Education urged members "WHEN APPROVING THE TEXTBOOK LIST, PLEASE EXCLUDE ALL BOOKS AUTHORED OR EDITED BY ED FENTON." The letter is dated November 24, 1971.

[3]Letter from A.B. Leake to Edwin Fenton dated January 12, 1972.

[4]Atlanta Journal, May 19, 1972.

[5]Atlanta Journal, July 18, 1972.

[6]The resolution was printed in News and Notes, the official newsletter of the Georgia Council for the Social Sciences, Fall 1972 issue.

[7]A detailed account of these events and others of this period in Georgia is found in Philip Lee Secrist, The Public Pays the Piper: The People and Social Studies in Georgia Schools, 1930-1970. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia, 1971, Chapter four.

[8]Citizen's Education Review, quarterly publication of the Georgia Basic Education Council, College Park, Georgia, Second quarter, 1969.